

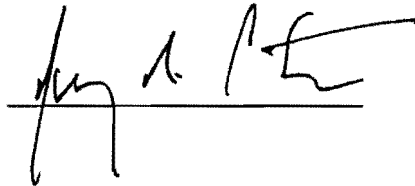
**Collegiate *A Cappella* Groups**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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## Abstract

In response to the recent increase and focus on collegiate *a cappella* groups in the United States, one can explore the growing trends, difficulties, and complexity some current *a cappella* groups face each and every day. Through interviews conducted by telephone conversations and e-mail responses, this thesis provides direct feedback, personal experiences, and useful advice from directors, group supervisors, and business managers of four top collegiate groups. The main purpose of this thesis serves as an opportunity to share my personal insight of being a member of the *a cappella* group Singers Five as well as provide helpful suggestions for those who wish to start an *a cappella* group of their own. Furthermore, through my research I hope to spark even more interest in this growing art form throughout college campuses. In addition to the written portion, I have included a creative piece which includes a documented performance of Singers Five from the spring of 2006. In this performance, Singers Five presents a variety of music to showcase their talents and efforts over the past two years.

### Acknowledgements

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-I would also like to thank the members of Singers Five (Nick Caine, Jenna Dock, Josh Hobbs and Charlie Wedel) for sharing their talent and time with me. Without them, my honors thesis would have lacked inspiration, personal insight, and our successful performance in Pruis Hall on April, 17, 2006.

## I. My Experience with Singers Five

As a graduating senior at Lebanon High School, I was lost as to which direction I wanted to take in regard to my college career. My original plan was to attend Depauw University and study psychology, then later to attend graduate school to achieve my doctorate in clinical psychology; however, I had this constant voice telling me to pursue my love for music. After assessing this conflict, I decided Ball State University was the place for me. I then began planning a future that combined both of these interests. After being invited to join the University Singers in May of 2002, I knew I had made the right decision.

While I was moving into Schmidt/Wilson in August of 2002, I still had no idea what was in store for me at Ball State University. I can remember stepping foot into MU123, the University Singers rehearsal room, and finally I knew I had made the right choice and felt as though I was right at home where I belonged. As my freshman year progressed, I felt my life was fulfilled and I was finally headed in the right direction; I was enjoying my love for music through University Singers and my vocal performance minor while pursuing my stable educational background in psychology.

During the fall of my sophomore year Charlie Wedel, a fellow member of University Singers, asked me if I was interested in joining a five person *a cappella* group he was starting. At first, I was hesitant due to the full load I was already carrying; however, after assessing my situation, I decided I had nothing to lose. Within a month, Singers Five was on their way. We began preparing the song *Listen to the Music* in hopes of making the finals for the Homecoming Talent Search Competition. To our surprise, Singers Five not only made the finals, we actually won the Musical Group division of the competition and were asked to perform at a Homecoming Alumni Banquet on campus.

Following this major achievement, Singers Five began building their repertoire with songs such as *How Sweet it is*, *Dancin' in the Streets*, *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*, and *True Colors*. Throughout the group's first year of existence we took it slow; we performed at numerous events on campus such as Relay for Life, Up 'Til Dawn, and University Singers Spectacular. Singers Five also had the opportunity to travel to Indianapolis and perform at the Ball State Discovery Group's holiday luncheon. The experience of being part of such an amazing process and getting the opportunity to share our talents with those around us was simply remarkable.

In the fall of 2005, Singers Five had a rough start getting back into the swing of things, but were able to pull off a second victory as the Musical Group winners in the 2005 Homecoming Talent Search Competition with the song *Dancin' in the Streets*. What I enjoyed most about this experience was getting the opportunity to be a part of the process of arranging a third verse to the song *Dancin' in the Streets*. What a wonderful feeling it was to be able to share our hard work with all of our friends and family. Following this second stepping-stone in the Singers Five development, we continued to build our repertoire in hopes of becoming more well-known.

One of the greatest difficulties with maintaining a group such as Singers Five was keeping the motivation, inspiration, and dedication alive. As one can imagine, this is much easier said than done. Singers Five continued to face difficulties and with each one we were able to make it through. One of these difficulties the group encountered was losing our senior soprano member, Allison Saul, to graduation. Nonetheless, we found Jenna Dock to fill the soprano position and continued the effort at maintaining excellence while getting our name familiar both on and off campus.

As I was reviewing my previous years at Ball State and deciding on an honors thesis topic, I found myself once again torn between my educational passion for psychology and my lifelong experience with and love for music. After thinking it through, I felt my honors thesis would be a great opportunity to share my progress and personal development with Singers Five and my passion for *a cappella* singing with fellow students here at Ball State University. I also thought it would be interesting to research other collegiate *a cappella* groups in the United States to broaden my knowledge about this flourishing form of performance.

The other members of Singers Five were thrilled to learn they were going to get the opportunity to share their accomplishments and feature their hard work by providing a free on-campus performance in Pruis Hall. Personally, the experience of producing this show through choosing our repertoire, reserving the venue, advertising around campus, and eventually presenting the final product on April 17, 2006 was extremely rewarding and enlightening. When I accepted Charlie Wedel's invitation to be a part of Singes Five nearly two years ago, I never imagined how much I was going to broaden my appreciation and general knowledge for music.

One of the parts I enjoyed most about producing the Singers Five performance in Pruis Hall was putting together the repertoire. Listed below are the program notes which were distributed at the performance; these include the name of each song, the arranger, and the reasons why they were chosen:

**The Star Spangled Banner**

arr. Charlie Wedel

Also known as The American National Anthem, this piece originated during the War of 1812. Starting with "O say can you see by the dawn's early lights," the words were

written by Francis Scott Key. It became well known as a patriotic song to the tune of a popular English song, "To Anacreon in Heaven." This particular version was arranged this past spring by junior Charlie Wedel, the bass member of Singers Five, in preparation for a performance at a Ball State men's basketball game.

### **Listen to the Music**

arr. Shalisa James

Originally sung by the Doobie Brothers, this song served as Singers Five's debut performance in the fall of 2004 during the Homecoming Talent Search competition. Soaring to great heights, Singers Five won their very first award as the 2004 Musical Group Winner of the Talent Search competition in which each member of the group received scholarship money. "Listen to the Music" continues to be the motto of Singers Five in which they encourage their audiences to "sit back, relax, and enjoy as you listen to our music."

### **How Sweet It Is**

arr. Deke Sharon

Inspired by James Taylor, this popular favorite provides a unique addition to the repertoire of Singers Five. The swing feel allows the group to show off their moving ability to get the crowd snapping along. Featuring tenor Josh Hobbs, this piece serves as an all-time favorite for Singers Five because of its uplifting melody and meaningful lyrics.

### **She Will Be Loved**

arr. Charlie Wedel

As the newest addition to Singers Five's repertoire, "She Will Be Loved" targets the younger crowd, thanks to the well-known group Maroon 5. Singers Five especially enjoys performing this piece based on the memories it brings them from their road trips. Featuring tenor Nick Caine, this song was recently arranged by current member Charlie Wedel.

**True Colors**

arr. Deke Sharon

As children born in the 1980's, the members of Singers Five felt it would appropriate to include this #1 hit by Cyndi Lauper. In addition, this song serves as a message to everyone in their audience to let their true colors shine through. Featuring Leslie O'Brien, Singers Five recently dedicated this song to the Ball University Singers cast of 2004-2005.

**Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?**

arr. Eric Van Cleave

Rockapella has served as an inspiration for the blossoming Singers Five *a cappella* group and they thought it would only be appropriate to feature this hit from the 1990's. This song also brings back fond memories of watching the popular television show and playing the thrilling game, "Where in the World is Carmen San Diego."

**Dancin' in the Streets**

arr. Deke Sharon

Utilizing their variety of talents, Singers Five spiced up this piece, originally performed by Martha and the Vendellas back in 1960's, leading them to their second title as Musical Group Winner in the Ball State Homecoming Talent Search competition this past fall. Singers Five especially enjoys this song because it reaches out to people of all ages and gets them moving along in their seats.

**II. Exploring Fellow Collegiate *A Cappella* Groups**

In order to truly appreciate the many collegiate *a cappella* groups across the United States, it is important to understand the nature of their work. As defined in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, *a cappella* music is simply choral music sung without instrumental accompaniment. "The term *a cappella* originally was used to distinguish the works composed in the older polyphonic style of the Renaissance from those written in the newer style of the early Baroque [...] however, musicians came to believe that *a cappella*



referred to unaccompanied choral singing” (Sadie, 46). Thus, we refer to the recent collegiate *a cappella* groups as ensembles that perform entirely without instruments. It is pretty astonishing to listen to the intricate recordings of groups such as Indiana University’s *Straight No Chaser*, Ithaca College’s *Ithacappella*, University of Michigan’s *Dicks and Janes*, and the University of Southern California’s *Sirens* knowing that they are making every single sound with their vocal folds alone.

More and more each year, the art form of *a cappella* singing is flourishing among universities across the United States. The initial interest in collegiate *a cappella* groups began at Yale University in 1909 with the Whiffenpoofs. The Whiffenpoofs began as a senior quartet that met for weekly concerts at Mory’s Temple Bar and is still known worldwide as one of Yale’s most celebrated traditions. Currently consisting of 14 male senior members, the Whiffenpoofs continue to travel worldwide and have recently performed on various television shows including *West Wing* and *Gilmore Girls* (Yale Whiffenpoofs).

Since the Whiffenpoofs original *a cappella* movement in the early 1900’s, collegiate *a cappella* groups have begun multiplying immensely. This increase specifically began to take place throughout the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Modern Collegiate). According to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, this was due in large part to the professional *a cappella* groups attracting a lot of attention for their renditions of popular songs (Collegiate *a cappella*). “As this new progressive style caught on, the *a cappella* art form evolved from its roots in harmonically complex barbershop quartets into a more contemporary and freely structured type of music” (Modern Collegiate).

In more recent years, the number of college *a cappella* groups has grown tremendously, quadrupling to over 1,200 groups since the 1980’s (Collegiate *a cappella*).

According to Wikipedia, this growth can be due mainly to a shift away from the jazz and classical ensembles and glee clubs to a more contemporary *a cappella* style, including current pop music, complete with textures and driving beats (Collegiate *a cappella*). Some common repertoire of collegiate *a cappella* groups today include songs from artists such as N'Sync, Jason Mraz, Alicia Keys, Boyz II Men, Britney Spears and many more.

With this boom of the last decade, literally hundreds of *a cappella* groups of every shape and size perform on American college campuses. Furthermore, many of these groups record CDs and some even excel to the level of competing at the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA). Among some of these top collegiate groups include University of Michigan's coed group *Dicks and Janes*, Indiana University's all-male group *Straight No Chaser*, Ithaca College's all-male group *Ithacapella* and University of Southern California's all-female group *The Sirens*.

In order to compare and contrast my experience as a member of a collegiate *a cappella* group, I created a questionnaire and conducted interviews both over the telephone and through e-mail with each of the top collegiate *a cappella* groups listed above. Hearing their stories and learning about the logistics of how their groups work was very interesting. While all four of these groups have been around for about ten years, I still found that I could relate to many of their original struggles and their passion for what they do due to my few years of experience in Singers Five.

One similarity I found among all of these *a cappella* groups, including the one I'm a part of, is the sense of camaraderie and family among the group members. According to Greg Harris, a senior member of *Ithacapella*, his favorite part of being in *Ithacapella* is, "The brotherly bond that forms between all the guys. We get our inspiration from each other."

While I am a member of a coed group, I can definitely relate to this. One of the most important parts of an *a cappella* group is the cooperation and teamwork between all of the members. “When there is tension between certain members, it is always portrayed in the musical product” states the group supervisor for *The Sirens*, Kali Smith. I can definitely attest to Kali’s statement; whenever our group has personal issues and are unable to leave them at the door, the productivity of our rehearsals struggle immensely.

Through interviewing principal members in these four top collegiate *a cappella* groups, I gained a great amount of insight on the logistics and the way each group is run. Similar to Singers Five, each of these groups are completely student-run organizations. I found that it took a tremendous amount of time to produce and maintain each and every one of these groups. Among these members were Tyler Trepp of *Straight No Chaser* and Ben Henri of *Dicks and Janes*, both are successful college students who also serve as the heart and soul of their organizations. As choral directors, they each undertake a wide spectrum of responsibilities to ensure their *a cappella* group succeeds to its full potential. As Ben Henri states, “I conduct rehearsals, look over and approve arrangements, run performances, determine outfits worn at gigs, oversee recordings, run the audition process, meet with the rest of the executive committee, and any other miscellany.”

As senior members of the all-female *a cappella* group *The Sirens*, Jenny Bronstein and Kali Smith also take on extensive roles in creating the product and maintaining the stature of their student-run organization. In Jenny’s interview, she mentioned she did the majority of the behind-the-scene work as fundraising and business manager. “On a typical day I would have to read and respond to emails, organize our rehearsals and tour schedule, run business meetings, as well as brainstorm ways to raise money to produce our CD. When

I asked her how she was able to balance these tasks with her academic responsibilities she responded, “Time management is the key. While it is extremely stressful at times, it always pays off in the end when I am able to see the finished product.” As a member of the Honors College and an involved student around campus, I can definitely relate to this. When I asked Kali Smith, the Group Supervisor of *The Sirens*, about her involvement she stated, “It is not always easy to take on a role such as the group supervisor, especially when dealing with twelve dynamic young ladies; however, the rewards and lessons learned along the way are simply priceless and I know they will help me as I pursue my career as a performer.”

Greg Harris, assistant producer of Ithaca College’s all-male *a cappella* group *Ithacappella*, is in charge of choosing repertoire, organizing auditions, as well as a number of other responsibilities. In reviewing Greg Harris’s email response, I found the process in which *Ithacappella* choose their repertoire to be very affective. “Each month we have pitching sessions in which members propose up to three ideas [...] we then listen to them, evaluate various arranging possibilities, and individually vote on them” stated Greg. In my experience with Singers Five, choosing repertoire has been very strenuous. I look forward to applying this new process in the future.

In each of the interviews I conducted, I specifically asked about each group’s audition process for future reference. While all of the groups used a callback process, which seemed to be efficient and most successful, I personally found the *Dicks and Janes* process to be the most beneficial. In round one they test the person’s range, pitch detection, tonal memory and sight-reading ability; they then have them sing a verse and chorus of a piece they have previously prepared. Following this, the executive committee then selects individuals for a second audition in which they participate in a regular rehearsal with the returning members.

“We have found this works best because it allows the entire group to give feedback and tests the sort of the dynamic the audiotonee will bring to the group” stated Ben Henri.

I found it extremely impressive, as well as helpful, to have explored the logistics of each of these top collegiate groups. The most impressive part is that all of the planning and directing is completely voluntary and is done solely by college students. Academic courses and studying can teach an individual a great deal; however, as attested by the individuals I interviewed, the amount of knowledge one can gain from actual experience in a group like *Ithacappella*, *Straight No Chaser*, *Dicks and Janes*, or *The Sirens* is simply priceless.

With the successes each group has faced, they have also encountered numerous setbacks and difficulties with managing an all student-run group. The most common problems each group reported, besides the turn-over each year due to graduating and transferring members, were ego problems within their group and “power hungry board members” stated Tyler Trepp, director of *Straight No Chaser*. While Singers Five is not quite developed enough to face the issues on the production side of things, we definitely deal with powerful egos among the members. Based on the single fact that most *a cappella* groups are student run without an adult mediator, it is difficult to provide constructive criticism that does not eventually offend someone. From what I have experienced, most performers have Type A personalities with high standards and would do anything for the spotlight; so, one can imagine the problems this creates. When I asked Tyler how *Straight No Chaser* deals with these types of problems, he said “Most of the problems eventually work themselves out; however, if we need to, we deal with them accordingly through confrontation.”

Another common problem reported was maintaining an equal amount of motivation and dedication among all members of the group. Kali Smith stated, “Every year we are faced with difficulty of our girls being overcommitted on campus. We have members heavily involved in service organizations, sororities, ‘real world’ jobs and other performing groups.” When asked how she manages this problem she replied, “As group supervisor, I encourage everyone to trust each other to give it their all, because people are more likely to put in the effort if people are expecting that will.” Fellow senior member Jenny Bronstein further commented, “Just loving to sing is not enough. Each day we remind the group members to stay dedicated and loyal to the team to ensure our group continues to thrive.”

As independent groups on their campus, three of the four groups also reported having financial difficulty as well. As Ben Henri of University of Michigan’s *Dicks and Janes* states, “We often face difficulty attracting people to our concerts, especially when we are competing with thirteen other groups on campus.” Tyler Trepp also addressed the issue in his interview stating, “*Straight No Chaser* has found it most affective to do as many free shows around campus in order to get our name out there and get people excited about what we do. This tends to create future shows for the group bringing in the majority of our income.” *The Sirens*, says Jenny Bronstein, “organize an annual magazine drive and send out donation requests” in order to overcome financial difficulty.

When asked what advice they would give to another collegiate *a cappella* group the interviewees gave some all around good information for any organization. All four unanimously mentioned the importance of maintaining a positive and enjoyable environment. According to Kali Smith, “By upholding a friendly and fun atmosphere, not only will rehearsals run more smoothly, everyone will perform better, blend better, and we’ll attract

larger audiences at our shows.” In regard the gaining support from the audience, Tyler Trepp found it is important to “do a variety of styles of repertoire and emphasize entertainment! People want to hear songs they know, so make sure to pick repertoire accordingly.” Based on my experience, Greg Harris seems to be right on target, “Work hard, persevere, sacrifice, but most of all have fun and enjoy yourselves and your audience will have to love it.”

It was an honor and an inspiration to get the opportunity to converse with these members of some of the top collegiate *a cappella* groups in the United States. I found that it was very easy to relate to many of their responses based on my involvement with Singers Five. It was especially interesting to hear about the different logistics involved in these top collegiate groups and was able to gain a number of useful techniques for the future. Through gaining knowledge of their different roles as director, group advisor, or business manager, I feel I am more prepared to possibly start a group of my own somewhere as I continue to pursue my interest in music business in Nashville, Tennessee.

In addition to this useful understanding on the complex process of producing these groups, I found myself strongly envying their stories of competing and performing all around the nation, and in some cases around the world. While I have thoroughly enjoyed my involvement with the University Singers and was able to travel abroad with them, I cannot help but wonder what it would be like to be a part of an *a cappella* group like Michigan’s *Dicks and Janes*. Prior to these interviews, I felt as though I was experienced in *a cappella* singing; now, however, I feel as though I have only experienced a tip of the iceberg. Through the inspiration I have attained from working on this honors thesis, I plan to continue my love for *a cappella* singing in the future by staying in contact with the progress of these

groups and possibly starting a professional *a cappella* group of my own in Nashville, Tennessee.

### **III. Implications of my research: Helpful tips on how to grow and maintain a collegiate *a cappella* group**

One of the most important things to keep in mind when creating an *a cappella* group is to establish a cooperative, positive, and enjoyable atmosphere from day one. By doing this from the start, you can help minimize the ego dilemmas and unmotivated attitudes many current collegiate groups face. This will also help the whole process and end result much more satisfying and successful. Another wise step would be to form some type of leadership team to manage the logistics of running a collegiate *a cappella* group. An effective team could consist of a director or president, an assistant director or assistant president, a business manager, a fundraising manager, and a group supervisor. Upon organizing a production team, each job should have a detailed list of descriptions in order to cover all areas of concern. Establishing a production team will also provide a sense of teamwork and support for your group.

Some other things to keep in mind when starting an *a cappella* group is to set up effective plans for auditions, rehearsals, choosing repertoire, maintaining finances, and developing a performance schedule. When doing this, it may be beneficial to explore the various methods discussed previously in section two of my thesis. Keep in mind it is extremely important to market your group and get your name out in any way possible. As suggested by Tyler Trepp, the director of *Straight No Chaser*, “Do as many shows as you can.” Whether these shows are free of charge, for campus organizations, or even annual



concerts, they will all help create a stable audience and fan club that will play a large part in promoting and maintaining the success of your group.

If you remember one thing from these tips remember this, have fun and never give up. One of the main roles of being a college student is to broaden your horizon and stretch your limits. By forming, or even just being a part of, a collegiate *a cappella* group you will learn so much about responsibility and working with others, both lessons you can utilize in all you do. Furthermore, you'll be able to enrich the lives of others through influential music and entertainment. It is important to keep in mind, however, it will not always be easy. From my experience over just the past two years, there have been times where it would have been easiest to just say "forget it" and move on. However, if I would have done that I would have never gained the life lessons that I have. There will be times you will have to make sacrifices, but just remember it is all for an experience that you will cherish forever, an experience that you can continue to apply in every aspect of your career and everyday life.

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